

The 1858 U. S. Senatorial Campaign in Illinois

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The 1858 campaign for the Illinois Senate seat between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas was said to be an electrifying preview of the presidential campaign to follow two years later. The most intriguing aspect of the 1858 campaign was the seven debates held in Illinois, all of which discussed the raging issue of slavery in the new territories.

Perhaps the most famous debate of the seven was the one held at Freeport, where the rivalry between Lincoln and Douglas came to a boiling point. It is within the Freeport debate that ideas and opinions on slavery have been discussed and evolved. As a result of the 1858 debate held in Freeport, many opinions and ideas on the issue of slavery have been disputed and evolved, which laid the foundation of the Civil War.

The most widely asked question during the 1840s and 1850s was if slavery should be expanded into the new territories. The Southern Democrats wanted to expand slavery into the new territories; the Northern Republicans, however, yearned to abolish slavery in the South and prevent slavery from spreading to the new territories. This issue gave birth to the 1858 campaign to decide a new senator from Illinois. The Freeport debate was one of the seven debates that were part of the 1858 campaign. Lincoln was selected by the Republicans to challenge Douglas' senate seat.

The Freeport debate was held on August 27, 1858. Over the course of the debate, the only topic discussed was slavery in the new territories. There were many conflicting ideas and opinions on this topic. One of such opinions is the freedom of the people's choice in choosing to include or exclude slavery. Douglas did not care whether slavery in

the new territories was approved or not; however, he insisted that the people of the new territories should have the choice to legalize slavery or not. Douglas believed that the federal government should remain neutral and not interfere with the people's decisions on slavery. Lincoln, on the other hand, disapproved the idea of the possible extension of slavery into the new territories. While he held his belief that blacks were inferior to whites, Lincoln thought that slavery was a wrong, and that it was inconsistent with the principles and practices of the democratic government. Lincoln contradicted Douglas by stating that the government should not play a neutral part in the extension of slavery and encouraged the government to prevent the extension of slavery. He hoped that if the extension of slavery was prevented, the idea might catch on, and slavery in the South would end. Both Lincoln and Douglas strongly held to their beliefs at the Freeport debate and aggressively argued to support their sides of the debate. The issue of slavery continued to evolve.

The debate reached its climax when Lincoln asked Douglas the following famous question: "Can the people of a United States Territory, in any lawful way, against the wish of any citizen of the United States, exclude slavery from its limit prior to the formation of a State Constitution?" He asked this question because he planned to put Douglas in an anti-slavery position. Because of this anti-slavery position, the Southerners would be angered, and Douglas might lose his supporters in the South for his presidential campaign later on. Lincoln's ultimate plan was to erase Douglas' chance of becoming president, so Douglas would not be able to make decisions on the extension of slavery. When it was finally Douglas' turn to speak, he confidently answered Lincoln's question with a yes. He believed that a territory could exclude slavery by creating laws

that were “unfriendly to the institution.” Although this answer won Douglas the Senate seat, his firm answer was remembered by the Southern Democrats who refused to support him in his race for president. Lincoln had successfully placed Douglas in an anti-slavery position and guaranteed that Douglas would likely never become President of the United States. If Douglas became president, the chances of slavery entering the new territories would increase, but Lincoln had already erased that possibility.

The Freeport debate played an important part in Illinois history. For one thing, Lincoln’s fame soared to national heights because of the attention he gained from the debate. Because Lincoln’s fame rose so much he was ready to become president and guide Illinois down the path of anti-slavery. Also, both Lincoln’s and Douglas’ ideas and opinions helped people decide if slavery was to be abolished or not. In the Freeport debate the ideas and opinions of slavery were disputed and evolved, and people began to choose between slavery and abolitionism. The most important and definite impact of the Freeport debate and the campaign of 1858 was that both slowly pushed Illinois towards an abolitionist point of view. It was important for the people of Illinois to hold a negative view of slavery as the nation further divided itself in the conflict of slavery. When the Civil War occurred, the people of Illinois knew to oppose slavery and help in the arguments with the knowledge they have learned. In conclusion, the Freeport debate ultimately prepared Illinois for the coming of the Civil War.

As a result of the debate held in Freeport, many opinions and ideas on the issue of slavery had been disputed and evolved, which laid the foundation of the Civil War. Lincoln and Douglas are two of the most historical figures that came from Illinois. Although each held opposing ideas, they worked together through their ideas and

opinions to mold and shape the history of slavery in Illinois in their legendary Freeport debate. [From Illinois Centennial Commission, *The Era of the Civil War*; Regina Kelly, *Lincoln Douglas; Lincoln–Douglas Debates, June 1858–October, 1858*. Online Detroit: Gale (2003): <<http://find.galegroup.com/srex/printdoc.do?content.htm>.> (Aug 27, 2007); Ralph G. Newman, *Lincoln for the Ages; Second Debate with Stephen A. Douglas*. The National Park Service. <<http://www.nps.gov/archive/liho/debate2.htm>> (Aug. 31, 2007); State Historical Library, *The Great Debates*; and Gallagher Wagner, et al., eds. *Civil War Desk Reference*.]